‘Moments of disruption’ and the development of expatriate TESOL teachers

Roderick Neilsen

Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

TESOL teachers, like mainstream teachers, often experience key incidents in their professional development. In expatriate TESOL however, unfamiliar cultural and linguistic contexts may disrupt teachers’ sense of both professional and personal identity. In this paper, narratives constructed from interviews of teacher experiences document a selection of critical events and discuss their implications for professional development in TESOL. Teachers reported that deep reflection on their experiences led to a re-conceptualisation of their professional and cultural identities. The analysis of their reflections may have significant implications for TESOL work in the context of the global and the local.

Keywords: TESOL; critical moments; professional development; overseas language teaching

Introduction

In the life histories of teachers, narrative studies have revealed key moments through which new insights lead to personal and professional development; these have been termed variously as ‘critical phases’, ‘turning points, or ‘critical incidents’. Such events may be necessary in that they help us grow and expand our comfort zone, impacting the way we live and teach (Loewen and Nelson, 2007).

For teachers working in TESOL, there are problems and issues, arising from intercultural contact in particular, which are not much documented. This paper focuses on how such contact may change the personal and professional perspectives of teachers in expatriate contexts, and explores how such experience can help them make sense of these new developments.

Critical events are documented here as narratives of the life-experiences of nine teachers who have lived for extended periods in non-English speaking countries. I will use the term ‘Moments of Disruption’ to refer to incidents which have altered their worldview, and modified their attitudes towards the culture-language nexus they initially assumed they were representing and embodying. Their experiences are valuable in that they have accumulated not only cross-cultural knowledge, but also the kind of knowledge which is received from direct contact with the effects of globalisation and glocalisation in a variety of cultures.

The narratives specifically explore the following: teachers' initial experiences of readjustment; awareness of difference in expectations of their roles as teachers; the impact of being perceived as representatives of 'Western' culture; and their re-appraisal of the educational and cultural-linguistic values of 'home'.

Teachers' stories: identity formation and critical moments

The literature on teachers' life histories documents a number of explorations into issues common to mainstream and TESOL teachers: career paths, motivation and job satisfaction, identity, stress, and critical moments. Pathways and contexts in TESOL, however, are extremely variable. Johnston (1997) has debated whether TESOL teachers can be said to have careers at all. TESOL lacks the status of established professions; there is commonly a lack of job security or benefits, and a lack of power base within institutions. Low morale and high rates of attrition typically result (McKnight, 1992).

Motivation has been extensively explored in mainstream teaching (Alexander, 2008), but in the TESOL context, Kassabgy, Boraie and Schmidt (2001: 227) decry 'the general lack of information in the applied linguistics literature concerning what makes English language teachers tick – their motivations, goals, and their views on what teaching does and should offer to people who make a career of it'. Motivation in teaching is

formative in terms of professional identity, which has been examined as narrative inquiry by Watson, (2006) and Søreide, (2006), among others. Nevertheless, Day et al (2006) point out that critical engagement with individual teachers' cognitive and emotional selves has been relatively rare.

The investigation of teaching careers has revealed incidents which impact crucially on teacher development. Such events have been identified as potentially positive factors for development, in that they frequently fortify motivation and resilience (Morgan et al, 2010). Mullock (2009) finds that for expatriate TESOL teachers, dissatisfaction and stress are usually due to factors extrinsic to the actual teaching, and more likely to relate to issues of cultural difference and displacement.

The ‘moments of disruption’ revealed through the narratives here relate to the issues of career choice, identity, and motivation discussed above. They refer to moments when teachers realise that their interactions with another culture have caused professional and/or personal change within themselves. From the narratives, I seek answers to three specific questions:

1) Are initial experiences of disruption crucial in shaping TESOL teachers’ development?

2) How might such incidents change their sense of professional and cultural identity?

3) How are the teachers repositioned with regard to these identities?

Methodology

Narrative enquiry is a particularly useful approach for research into TESOL practitioners, whose intercultural experiences span the personal and the professional. It goes beyond simple story-telling to ‘an analytic examination of the underlying insights and assumptions that the story illustrates’ (Bell, 2002: 208). Narratives constructed from case study interviews may help understand experience and access information that interviewees may not have consciously realised, although the researcher is of course ‘re-storying’ to create a focused effect, and must re-construct from an ethical perspective (Josselson, 1996).

I approached teachers known to me in personal and/or professional settings, who have at least six years teaching experience in non-Anglophone contexts. I wanted to represent a breadth of experience of institutions, cultures, a variety of teaching and ‘life’ situations, and degrees of 'dislocation'. I conducted and recorded semi-structured interviews with each of the teachers in Australia. Two teachers were working overseas so they recorded and ‘interviewed’ themselves with prompts from a questionnaire. Interview questioning focused on disjunctures the teachers experienced, both initially and at later intervals overseas as their emotional

distance from their home cultures increased. From the data, patterns emerged which related to paradigms of culture shock, but also revealed changing perceptions of home culture, professional roles, and identity. TESOL teachers may be seen as part of a 'third culture' (Kramsch 1993) of international workers who experience dislocation and disjuncture; for this reason emerging patterns were then shaped into discursive narratives within a theoretical framework of Appadurai's (1990) ethnoscapes, one of his proposed five dimensions of cultural flow through which the fundamental disjunctures of globalisation may be explored. The critical moments that emerged were individual and personal, but they may resonate with other contexts with which readers may be familiar. Therefore the narratives constructed from this small sample may provide rich information concerning context of culture for both new and experienced TESOL professionals, and also inform those in related fields of education and social studies.

I will now give brief biographies of the teachers interviewed. Participants (pseudonyms used) gave informed consent and relevant ethics committee approval was obtained.

The Teachers

Maria has more than 25 years experience in TESOL. She grew up in Anglophone southern Africa, and went to the UK for secondary education.

She taught English in Mozambique and Cameroon, and now works as a lecturer in TESOL in Australia.

Deborah, from the UK, is Director of Studies at an Australian University language centre. She has 25 years teaching experience, including periods in Cameroon and Bulgaria.

Deryn, from Melbourne, Australia, has taught and lectured in Tenerife, Canary Islands since 1984, after several years working in TESOL in the UK.

Graham, from the UK, has worked in TESOL for over 25 years, in Nigeria, Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Brunei; he settled in Australia, and worked as Director of Studies at various English language centres.

Jennifer, Graham's partner, also British, has also taught in Nigeria, Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Brunei. She is currently teaching ESL in a private secondary school in Brisbane.

Alissa has had over 20 years TESOL experience. Australian-born but educated in Canada, she went to Japan for two contracts, then later came to teach in Brisbane.

Shelley is British, with West Indian and Kenyan parents. She taught mainstream subjects in the Bahamas with her partner Ed, and then taught TESOL in Brunei, before migrating to Australia.

Ed, from the UK, has 25 years experience in TESOL. He taught in Italy, Saudi Arabia, and the Bahamas. He and Shelley spent seven years in Brunei, before moving to Australia.

Ian is a New Zealander who studied at university in Melbourne, Australia. Now a naturalised Australian, he taught for 18 years in Korea, and has a South Korean partner. He is currently working in Saudi Arabia.

The data: Initial experiences in other cultures

As a career move, TESOL is often seen simplistically as a "ticket to travel", as Senior (2006) notes. Initial attitudes towards a destination country or culture are significant for successful adjustment. At first the environment is often perceived as exotic rather than threatening, because of the excitement of travel and change, which tends to energise. This initial euphoria can be maintained if there are enough support structures in place. Graham and Jennifer went to Nigeria, as a teaching couple, on a contract with accommodation and return flights provided. It was their first overseas contract, and they chose it over other offers not through any special interest, but because of their interest in an experience of cultural and geographical difference. Preparation and orientation were limited, yet Graham states he 'remained on a high' all the time he was in Nigeria**.**

> *I couldn't believe I was really there, and there really were goats all over the road, mud huts, you know some of them had air cons and electricity and TV.* **Graham**

Jennifer, too, remembers she was both 'very homesick but very excited'**.** They continued their expatriate ELT work in Kenya, Saudi Arabia, and Brunei, all locations of relatively large cultural distance from the UK. Now living in Australia, they declare feeling homesick for the expatriate life. Other teachers underwent less positive initial experiences. Maria sought a sense of returning 'home' to Africa when she obtained a post in Mozambique, but found the initial experience disturbing and isolating. She reports feeling clearly 'culture shocked':

> *…I had an idea what to expect, but the realities…. my first experience of going into a non-English speaking environment on my own, a very long way from home, no telephone, no E-mail, none of that stuff…. in spite of many, many assurances, when I arrived in Maputo they were actually not expecting me.* **Maria**

In another example, Ed chose his first destination, Italy, out of an interest in the culture, but remembers becoming introspective and depressed during the first two months. Although Italy can be considered a country with relatively less cultural distance to the UK, age and lack of experience made the initial experience very difficult. He went to Ancona, a town of about 1000 people, where very few people spoke English.

> *I'd say the first two months were very, very difficult, you know in language circles the anomie which people experience, I ... became very, very introspective, depressed, not knowing how to communicate, very isolated, began to think I'd made a terrible decision.* **Ed**

His *anomie* disappeared as his language skills in Italian improved. This led in turn to closer relationships with Italians, who, he reports:

> *To a certain extent adopted me...you know took it upon themselves to make sure I was having a good time and seeing Italians in the best light...very warm people, so that went hand in hand with language proficiency.* **Ed**

The examples above demonstrate that if a posting is accepted because of interest in a particular country, adjustment is not necessarily more rapid than if the decision is more random. For Ed, Italy was a personal choice, yet he still encountered difficulty adjusting. For Graham and Jennifer, these stages were practically absent, (though naturally they had each other's company). For other teachers who went to Africa, it seemed that fascination with the exotic overcame any negative effects. Deborah, working for the International Voluntary Service (IVS) in Cameroon, reports that an injury forced her to stay for another year, so she was able to immerse herself more deeply in the experience of 'otherness'.

The only bad thing ...which turned out to be a good thing, is that I was hospitalised because I went bareback horse-riding and broke my arm, but I thought well I'll spend a few weeks in hospital..... It helped me decide. **Deborah**

To close this section, two of the teachers summarise their feelings of mental and physical disruption at the beginning of their overseas working life. Jennifer reports how, when young and relatively independent, the 'hardships' were all taken in their stride. She claims not to have experienced the kind of 'dip' that is supposed to be a part of culture shock after the initial euphoria.

We took the fact that we were stuck in a crummy hotel for nine weeks and we got dysentery, baggage went to the wrong place..... we were young and it was all exciting, I don't know if we could do it again. **Jennifer**

Finally, Maria expresses the feeling of being empowered by facing difference and dealing with it:

It's good fun on the edge, once you settle down, it's interesting, exciting. **Maria**

The following sections focus on disruption relating to unfamiliar expectations of their role as teachers, and to the ambivalent experience of being perceived to embody 'western' culture.

Questioning teacher roles

Moments of disruption can occur due to extreme factors; Maria's experiences in Mozambique were of a country emerging from civil war. She reports that her students there suffered conceptual and learning difficulties, as well as problems with health and fatigue**.** Food rationing and lack of transport meant students were usually exhausted, and the disruptions of war had caused them to miss out on several years of education; some primary classes had students older than eighteen. The war had also shattered much of the infrastructure:

> *That's a shock, if you've never lived in a war situation, you couldn't move... you were very much in this enclave, none of the little things that make life a bit more interesting like going to the shop, going to the café, there was nothing to go to. Home, work, work, home.* **Maria**

She also questioned whether her teaching content was appropriate. Before going to Mozambique she had perhaps assumed that teaching English is 'somehow a "good" thing, a positive force by its very nature in 'the search for international peace and understanding' (Naysmith, 1987:3):

> *The other contradiction about going to a developing country is you often ask yourself whether you're teaching something really that useful... I try consciously to see myself as an enabler, and*

that language is about empowerment and....helping people to articulate things and function in the world. **Maria**

Maria questions how empowering English can be for children who have missed several years of education, and are not literate either in their first language or in the official national language, Portuguese. Deborah articulates similar sentiments from her experience in rural Cameroon, echoing Phillipson's (1992:217) comment that 'most newly independent periphery-English countries were in a hurry to expand education, and accepted foreign support in doing so.' In West Africa voluntary support was based on the belief that maintaining Centre standards of English was a priority.

I think they (IVS) were giving the students the wrong sort of education, they were training them for white-collar jobs when there weren't the jobs available.... training them in 16th and 14th century English ...what's the purpose of learning that? I thought the sort of Aid they should be sending was to educate the people to be able to go back to the land and use the resources they had, so I had sort of mixed feelings about that. **Deborah**

Method is also a significant constituent of teacher identity. The adoption of tenets of method at an early stage in the expansionist period of English language has been criticised by Phillipson (1992) and Canagarajah (1999). Several teachers in this study reported more successful teaching outcomes when they 'threw the book away', that is, they did not strictly

follow local or Centre methodology, but brought in many elements of their own personality, a strategy later endorsed by literature on postmethod practices (Kumaravadivelu 1994).

An essentialised view of ‘Asian’ methodology is that it is passive and teacher-centred, as opposed to the western communicative model of learner-centred involvement. Alissa first taught in Japan in a manner she perceived as appropriate to Japanese culture and the institution, but found her students less than responsive; their written evaluation of her was not positive. She later hypothesised that her students may have expected different approaches from foreign teachers. When she gave her personality free rein, her students reacted more positively.

> *My first six months I didn't teach as me, my personality, I was very strict and straight...I wanted to do everything by the book and they had evaluation forms...then I changed to my own personality which is very loose, go with the flow, I'd negotiate what they wanted to do and how they wanted to do it.* **Alissa**

How far then should teachers be sensitive to ‘traditional’ local methodology? Most of the teachers report being given freedom in the *way* they taught, although materials and resources were scarce in some cases. Thus native-speaking English teachers’ use of differing methodology was acceptable, even if other subjects were taught in traditional ways. This suggests that English teaching *method* can be as empowering as the

language itself. Ed reports that the expected system in Brunei, for example, was ‘chalk and talk’, marking it as typically Asian:

> *Our background as language teachers was very much at variance with what the Brunei government expected us to do in the classroom...so there was an obvious conflict there… if we'd have followed the dictates of the Brunei Education Department, we wouldn't really have achieved an awful lot in Brunei.* **Ed**

He also expresses his belief in the relationship of effective teaching to the expression of the personality of the teacher.

> *You obviously look for a way in, as an individual, to switch on your students...the personality of the teacher was very, very important in engaging students and getting the right teaching environment… you're also a role model culturally, because of the Islamic-Christian divide.* **Ed**

Ed’s comment on the ‘Islamic-Christian divide’ points to the fact that it is not only the role and status of the teacher that may differ in other societies. The foreign teacher also presents a set of cultural attitudes, which may be interpreted on various levels. Moments of disruption may also occur because of cultural assumptions made by students, as the next section will discuss.

The teacher as a representative of 'Western' culture

One of the more fundamental disruptions, and a crucial one in terms of current debates about the globalisation of English, is the conflict between the teachers' changing perception of their cultural identity and the role projected on them from within other cultural contexts. Most teachers reported how students, colleagues and administrations at times 'pigeon-holed' them as representatives of 'Western' culture. Deborah felt ambivalent towards such a role.

> *I think that they (African people) always thought of me as the quintessential Englishwoman which was an image I didn't particularly like, I just wanted to be me ..... and in Bulgaria I felt I was having to represent the West in a way that I hadn't expected to.* **Deborah**

Deborah was dissatisfied with the projected perceptions of both of her teaching contexts. In Cameroon she fulfilled the stereotype of an independent, educated person from an advanced culture; in Bulgaria, where she experienced phone-tapping and surveillance, she was seen as a representative of the 'decadent West'.

Ed admitted that the responsibilities of representing a culture could not be avoided, but argues for the importance of adhering to a personal cultural

philosophy which embodies the integrity of the teacher, above and beyond any cultural role or stereotype.

> *I think it's very important that you know that you are a role model for the culture that you come from, and that you fly the flag, whatever flag it is...I didn't mean the Union Jack, I actually meant which philosophy of life you adhere to... you take that into a classroom with you, every moment of the day.* **Ed**

Ed seems to be arguing for some kind of personal integrity that may transcend cultural stereotyping. However, the final example in this section will show that certain stereotypes are more problematic. Shelley, Ed's spouse, is British born and educated, and of Afro-Caribbean descent. Soon after she arrived in Brunei with Ed, she experienced a confusing episode of racism. Racial issues are prominent in Brunei and Malaysia, both of which have multi-racial populations but are Malay dominated politically. Race can in fact be seen as the basis of governance and political mobilisation in Malaysian politics (Maznah and Saravanamuttu 1990). The incident described here may have arisen due to (perhaps misguided) attempts by Centre-based institutions to placate local sensibilities. When interviewed in London by the organisation which managed the Brunei secondary contract, Shelley was promised a secondary teaching job along with her husband Ed. When in Brunei no post was forthcoming, she encountered an embarrassing and insulting situation with the local (British) representative.

> *(The woman said)...well actually you know it might say that you're British, but actually you're not are you, you're West Indian aren't you? I said well I've never been to the West Indies, I was educated in Britain, and that's when we knew that that was the problem.* **Shelley**

Shelley and Ed both reported feeling shocked at encountering such obvious racial prejudice from a British organisation. She was appointed to a school after Ed reported the matter to the London office. I asked if Shelley felt she could be sure whether the problem originated with the agency or perhaps with the Brunei Ministry of Education. She answered that later events indeed suggested local prejudice, as after seven years of successful teaching in Brunei a newly appointed headmaster from Singapore engineered her dismissal on spurious grounds of insufficient qualifications, despite her PGCE and previous teaching experience, not to mention an untarnished local record. She added that colleagues (both local and expatriate) protested, but were threatened with dismissal.

Shelley ultimately felt that the Company were (clumsily) attempting to forestall what they saw as a potential problem with the local Ministry of Education. It may be that education administrators in other cultural contexts may expect native English speaking teachers to be stereotypically ‘blonde and blue-eyed’. Non-stereotypes are therefore less marketable and may be seen as some kind of deception, especially in

contexts where native-speaking teachers are paid more than locals. As Holliday states:

> Racism even pervades ‘a nice field like TESOL’ (Kubota, 2002:84), which only appears not to be racist because it conforms to the contemporary discourse of liberal humanism which suppresses overt expression of racial prejudice (Holliday 2005:24).

Revised views of ‘home’: ‘We can’t go back to Kansas’

Years of immersion in other cultural contexts can result in revised value judgments of ‘home’. Disjuncture may be experienced at a profound level, when former assumptions about work and identity are eventually questioned. The later stages of the model of cultural awareness proposed by Hanvey (1979) are typified by deeper understanding of ‘other’ cultures, a revised perception of one’s own culture and an awareness of how an individual is culture-bound.

Having represented a certain country or culture in the eyes of other societies, a common feeling many of the teachers developed was that they no longer connected fully with the ‘home’ they had left behind. Instead they were now part of a transnational group, whose identification with home culture was reduced to a few symbols of national pride. Deryn cites the importance of Australian success in sport as a cultural symbol she still

identifies with. However, she admits to being confused when Australia played Spain in the Davis cup, and a dubious incident occurred involving an Australian.

> *I felt that the Spanish crowd behaved really badly...and that made me feel very confused...then I heard a person I didn't know behaved ...with a lack of humanity that I wouldn't have imagined possible, and I was horrified to discover that this person was maybe one of four or five other Australian citizens here in Tenerife, so I thought isn't that strange, for somebody to have a sort of sense of myself as foreign, as Australian though I haven't lived in Australia for over twenty years.....the cultures that surround English, they still feel very cosy for me, like slipping into some warm slippers*. **Deryn**

Contradictions of identities are expressed here. Deryn is obviously disgusted by the behaviour of someone who wears the same ‘cosy slippers’, and she realises that she has mixed feelings about the culture she is supposed to be representing. Ed shows similar ambivalence when he describes his feelings about English society after prolonged absence.

> *I actually began to see for the first time the real cracks in English culture, in English society, we're not the biggest, the best, the greatest, certainly in the realms of education, I thought there's a lot of things which are awfully wrong with... the English*

education system, and that's why I've remained overseas for as long as I have. **Ed**

Ed's comments show how, as a product of a particular education system, the values he had been trained in were shaken by contact with other cultures. A kind of 'reverse culture shock' was experienced. Deborah gives an example of disorientation on returning from Africa, back to the consumerist western world and its more rapidly-changing fashions:

I remember getting off the plane and being driven through the streets of London and thinking I don't fit in here. I felt really... it took me a few months to even feel I was back home, and weird things had happened like the miniskirt had come in ... and I just felt like something out of the bush. **Deborah**

Ian gives a final example of an experience of cultural redefinition on returning home after ten years in Korea. In his case long immersion in another culture has actually resulted in disruption to his linguistic-cultural behaviour.

I was waiting for a bus when I went back to Sydney in '89... I saw a gentleman standing there, in his early 60s, and I went up to him and suddenly realised, how do I address this guy? Here I was in my own culture saying 'what do I say?' 'hey', or 'excuse me', or 'g'day', I thought this is crazy, this is my own culture, what am I doing? **Ian**

Disruptions to earlier forms of behaviour are seen by most teachers here as positive, if unsettling. They no longer belong completely one culture or the other. They have entered a third culture, which transcends geographical boundaries, but the trade-off is a sense of loss of grounding, the play of disjunctures within the ethnoscapes (Appadurai 1990).

Discussion

These ‘moments of disruption’ discussed here are challenges that have modified the worldviews and attitudes towards profession and home culture of a group of TESOL teachers working in diverse cultural contexts. The narratives explored in this paper reveal a number of trends; in general, the teachers corroborate Mullock’s (2009) claim that stress and dissatisfaction experienced overseas is more often due to experiences outside teaching. Their physically and mentally disruptive moments have generally resulted in positive re-evaluations of the nature of teaching work in a globalised context. The teachers attest to lack of power in their professional contexts, but also report feelings of exhilaration, and the gaining of personal and professional development through such moments.

In answer to the first research question, initial experiences may be important, but context is a highly significant variable. Personal and professional circumstances are naturally diverse. One factor that the narratives do reveal about initial experience is that TESOL work often

shows disjuncture between training and work in the field. How can TESOL teachers be prepared adequately for work in other cultures when the sands are continually shifting under their feet? Graham and others believe that it would be difficult to build such preparation into training except in a very generic way. However, it appears that the experience of difficult beginnings leads to greater resilience, as Morgan et al (2010) suggest; Maria confirms that it is indeed 'good fun on the edge'.

Regarding the second question, moments of disruption appear to promote self-questioning regarding personal and professional identity. Changing self-perception emerges regarding roles as both teacher and as a representative of 'western' culture, extremely so in Shelley's experience of racism. In terms of professional identity, the teachers appeared to develop methodologically, their experience enhancing reflective and postmethod practices (Kumaravadivelu 1994). Teaching contexts often threw up educational or linguistic mismatches, for example in Deborah's and Maria's experiences of inappropriate curriculum content in Africa. As teachers they were powerless: administrations believed that an education oriented to western goals and models was beneficial. However, these teachers were empowered as their resourcefulness developed along with the realisation that their job is to empower others, echoing Simon-Maeda's (2004) findings that teachers are directed to further more progressive ends through uncovering the field's sociological and political underpinnings.

As regards the third question, all the teachers described themselves as repositioned as a result of cultural and temporal distancing from 'home'. Their educational experiences led them to question the tenets of method critiqued by Phillipson (1992), and their broader intercultural experiences disturbed core elements of identity. Overall, there was disruption to a general sense of things once taken for granted, and the result of this is an increased awareness of difference- and a development of intercultural competence, supporting Hanvey's (1979) model of the later stages of development of cultural awareness. Deborah experienced disruption of 'progress' in her home country which led her to question what such progress meant. Prolonged absence from home disrupted Ian's cultural-linguistic patterns; even phatic responses to everyday situations were no longer automatic. The 'cosy slippers' wear out, the 'cracks' begin to show.

Conclusion

The journeys of these teachers across the ethnoscapes have been unpredictable and disjunctive. In his discussion of this aspect of global flows, Appadurai, (1996:196) points particularly towards the disjuncture between the processes of migration and mass-mediated discourses and practices, which I have taken here to include discourses of English pedagogy and the place of the English language in the context of the global and the local. The flow of these teachers' lives has been marked by

physical, professional, and cultural disruption. The issues discussed here suggest that they may have learned along the way, as Hobsbawm (1992) has suggested, that in culture terms there is no certainty of a single mythologised truth.

The English language is generally seen as an engine of globalisation, and the significant intercultural experiences of practitioners in the field of TESOL may inform some of the continual calls for new theorising of global phenomena, and may enrich the education contexts of countries such as Australia, which is a significant destination to non-English speaking migrants from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

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Bio

Roderick Neilsen has taught ESOL in the UK, Saudi Arabia, Colombia and Brunei. He settled in Brisbane in 1996, where he taught and trained teachers at the University of Queensland. His PhD thesis explored the experiences of teachers overseas. He now lectures in TESOL at the Queensland University of Technology.

Address:

Dr Roderick Neilsen

40 Masthead Street

Jamboree Heights

QLD 4074